

THE 4 C'S OF *Stewardship* COMMUNICATION



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THE 4 C'S OF STEWARDSHIP COMMUNICATION

How we communicate information is often as important as the information itself. A poorly communicated vision cannot inspire a community to reach their goals. An incoherent message that pays little attention to the power of words and their meaning can leave people confused. In the Church, we often suffer from having little or no communication strategy. In parishes where leadership is attempting to build a stewardship culture and form their parishioners in this way of life, the manner with which we communicate is vitally important. Attention to how and what you communicate can mean the difference between cultivating key fruits in the community or languishing for years trying to get people on board with the message. Building a communication strategy on the 4 C's of stewardship communication (Concrete, Consistent, Constant, and Creative) is good stewardship as well, because how you handle the message entrusted to you by Christ and his Church matters. It also will help provide you with communications that make an impact in shaping parish culture.

1. CONCRETE COMMUNICATIONS

What is stewardship? What are the expectations of the parish for membership? Do we have different goals for the community this year as opposed to last year? These are questions needing concrete answers that people can understand clearly. Too often, we speak in terms of ideals and a broad perspective. Too much of that talk can not only confuse people, but it can lead them to conclude that there is no concrete vision with concrete answers.

The meaning of stewardship is articulated clearly in the U.S. Bishops' pastoral letter, "Stewardship: A Disciple's Response." One reads in the first pages of the document that three convictions run throughout the letter, and the writers label them as challenge, choice, and vision. We are challenged to develop a mature faith in ourselves, where we respond to the call of Jesus Christ without counting the cost. We then must make a choice to live out this faith 24/7.

Enough of us living in this manner can transform our Church and the world around us. That is the vision of stewardship. It is also concrete. I have worked with too many parishes and dioceses that have never even heard of these convictions.

If you are using a stewardship campaign model that will ask parishioners to make a commitment of some sort, everything about that campaign and the expectations needs to be concrete. Exactly what will happen when I turn in my commitment form? What specific training and formation will be asked of me to involve myself in a ministry? What are the real needs of the parish, whether they be financial, ministerial, or pastoral?

When communicating to people about what living this life is all about, be willing to issue concrete challenges to the parish population. Set goals for what you want to accomplish and in what time period. A parish that is trying to build a stewardship culture needs to have a pastoral plan, simply because having no plan is poor stewardship. How can we be accountable for all God gives us if we have no plan on how to cultivate, grow, and use it?

2. CONSISTENT COMMUNICATIONS

I remember many years ago being called out by a colleague for using multiple terms interchangeably. I was still growing in my understanding of stewardship and that was reflected in my language. Are we calling people to be good stewards or volunteers? What do I really mean when I say disciple, steward, and parishioner? I lacked intentionality in my words, and that is the key to becoming consistent in one's use of terms. It also is key in communicating a vision. There cannot be so many visions that people must guess which one you are referring to at the time.

It takes great care to be consistent in your communications, but the payoff can be great. Once I worked with a parish that seemed to get caught up in the latest trends and terminology of the day. The pastor would write and talk about stewardship one day, moving from maintenance to mission another, and being intentional disciples another. The real problem in this approach was that he didn't mean something significantly different with each communication. Then with each new book he read, new terminology would be added to his repertoire.

Those sitting in the pew had no idea what to buy into, and we failed to make the progress we had hoped in building up the parish community.

Parishes who have the greatest success have read through all the latest literature out there and have crafted a message that is uniquely theirs ... and they stick with it. My own parish is a great example. We have been a dynamic growing parish for many years and have truly embraced a stewardship way of life. You will find in all our communications and efforts the common call to "know, love, and serve" Jesus Christ. It is a formula that comes to us from the Catechism, and it sums up the mission and calling of every human on earth. It is something people can understand, and it is repeated through written and spoken language, branding, and formation opportunities.

3. CONSTANT COMMUNICATIONS

Are we calling people to a way of life or to respond to a commitment card once a year? If it is a way of life, a parish cannot have "stewardship month" and be successful in bearing great fruit. This calling to a mature discipleship, where we can say yes to the daily call of Jesus, needs to be communicated 12 months out of the year. We may use campaigns and commitment cards in our parishes as tools to call people to accountability, but these tools cannot become synonymous with the term stewardship.

Your communication must also convey the constancy of what we are all called to in this way of living. We cannot only try to be good stewards in our parish. In fact, the parish is the training ground where we are formed so that we can take that into our homes, schools, workplaces, and beyond. Fr. James Mallon, author of "Divine Renovation," likes to say that we exist less for those inside the parish and more for those outside our walls. In order to become the vision talked about in the stewardship pastoral letter, we must be about more than joining parish ministries and tithing to our parishes. If stewardship is truly about more than the 3 T's of time, talent, and treasure, than we must always be communicating that in all places. If stewardship is about the big E (which is everything), then the message needs to be articulated every day and at every turn.

I have been writing Everyday Stewardship reflections for over 6 years now. There exist at least two reflections for every Sunday of all three cycles. Using them in bulletins and online is one way that parishes communicate the message in a constant manner. Why aren't a couple key reflections enough? Why can't I just stop writing these reflections? The reason is because the scope of human life and experience is so great that there is always something new to say. How is your parish communicating the stewardship message in a constant manner? Does the call to this life permeate your culture, or is it simply a label for a committee or campaign? You do not have to use my reflections in your communications, but you do need to find a way to keep hitting that message home with your parishioners. Remember, it is a culture that you are trying to create.



4. CREATIVE COMMUNICATIONS

If you are going to be successful at the first three C's, you are going to have to be creative. You must strive to find fresh new ways of communicating your message. I believe that in the same manner that we have been called to a new evangelization in the Church, we need a new stewardship. Jesus and his Gospel remain the same, but how we share that can and must change as the world changes. Attention spans are shrinking, and competition for space in people's hearts and minds is stronger than ever. In a society where consumerism and materialism are often the prevailing orders of the day, how can you effectively communicate a message of generosity, accountability, and surrender to God?

The first step to unleashing creativity is understanding the personality and character of your parish community. Not all parishes are the same, so never assume what works well elsewhere will work well in your parish. When you have a good sense of who you are as a community, you can better project what will work best.

I have seen many creative ideas bear fruit over the years in different parishes. One parish entrusts a standing crucifix each Sunday to a new family. It is a gift from the parish, and the household to which it is given is called to steward that gift wisely in care, display, and prayer.

They then return it to the community next Sunday so it can be passed on. Some parishes like my own have given cash to teenagers with the request to simply be good stewards of the gift. Some give it away to a good cause, while others use it to bake items to sell so the money multiplies. Some parishes now have formed small faith-sharing groups that discuss regularly the 6 characteristics of an Everyday Steward from my books.

Thinking outside the box is key. Thinking of new ways to talk about what stewardship means has been my passion for years now. I have seen lightbulbs go off over the heads of those who had struggled for so long to understand this way of life in a meaningful manner. There are as many ways of communicating a message as there are people. If that message is concrete enough to understand and consistent with all other messaging from parish leadership, a striving for creativity will serve you well as you try to move hearts and form minds.

Do you need assistance in crafting a stewardship communication plan? Maybe we at LPi can help. Do not hesitate to reach out. Visit us at www.4lpi.com to explore what we can do to partner with you today.

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